

Speaking in Tongues

According to Acts 1:4-8, before Jesus ascended to heaven he told his followers that they would soon be "baptized with the Holy Spirit". He said that this baptism would give them miraculous powers which they could use to help spread their new faith to other people.

The promised baptism took place a short time later on the Jewish day of Pentecost. As described in Acts 2:1-47, the followers of Jesus were together in a large house in Jerusalem when a sound like a rushing wind suddenly surrounded them, and flames of fire descended upon them. As the Holy Spirit filled them, they began to speak in tongues.

In this passage the word "tongue" means a foreign language. Thus the followers of Jesus were miraculously talking in many different languages. This got the attention of people in the street outside the house, many of whom were foreigners, because they heard voices speaking their own languages. When a large crowd gathered, Peter went outside and explained how the miracle had occurred. As a result, many people were converted to the new faith.

Later events would show that this baptism with the Holy Spirit also gave Jesus' followers other miraculous powers in addition to the ability to speak foreign languages. These other powers included the ability to heal people, the ability to prophesy, and the strength to resist persecution. Called Gifts of the Holy Spirit, all of these special powers would be used to help spread the new faith.

Events would also show that the Holy Spirit can sometimes give people a different way of speaking in tongues. In this other method, instead of talking in a foreign language, a person will speak in a way that sounds like babble. This babble, which may be accompanied by shaking, jerking, and shouting, usually seems meaningless to other people who hear it.

Note: In scholarly discussions, this apparent babble is called glossolalia. The other way of speaking in tongues, miraculous speech in a foreign language, is called xenoglossy. But scholars aren't always consistent in how they use these terms, because they sometimes apply the word glossolalia to both cases.

Does a Divine Language Exist?

Among modern Christians, the babble form of glossolalia is by far the most common. But some people don't think it should be called babble. Instead, they believe that it is a divine language, often called the language of heaven or the language of the angels. To those who believe this, tongue-speakers are being used by God as channels for the delivery of messages in this divine language. And some people, called interpreters, can translate these messages into human words.

The idea of a divine language isn't new, for it was mentioned by Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. Specifically, in verse 14:2, he says:

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.

Actually, Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians partly because glossolalia had become so prevalent in their church that it was disrupting the worship services. To help solve this problem, he urged them to show restraint when talking in tongues during open worship. He also mentioned that he himself spoke in tongues more than any of them did, but that he normally avoided doing it during worship services (1Corinthians 14:1-19).

Paul was trying to get the Corinthians to conduct their services in a more orderly manner. But one of his recommendations for this purpose seems wrong to many modern Christians. This recommendation is found at 1Corinthians 14:34-35, where he says:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

Some people think that Paul wrote this because he had heard that most of the disruptions in the services at Corinth were caused by women, and he thought that forbidding them from speaking would be the best way to solve the problem. But some scholars have a totally different explanation for this passage, because they don't think that Paul really wrote it. Instead, they believe that an unknown person inserted it into his letter at a later time, as part of an effort by male Christians to exclude women from leadership roles in the church. Supporters of this theory say that the passage doesn't fit smoothly with the surrounding parts of the letter, and therefore it is probably a later insertion.

But whether Paul actually wrote this passage or not, most modern women strongly disagree with it. They feel that they have just as much right to speak in church as men do. And that includes speaking in tongues.

Paul's letter, together with some other evidence, indicates that glossolalia was a fairly common practice among the earliest Christians. Some scholars think that it became less common in subsequent centuries. But it probably never completely died out, because it is mentioned in writings and reports from several later periods.

Modern Revival of Tongue Speaking

A strong resurgence in tongue-speaking began in the early twentieth century and has been gaining strength ever since. But most of the early participants in this revival were poor people from small lesser-known church denominations. Partly for this reason, mainstream Christian leaders were initially suspicious of the activity. To them, the behavior of these new tongue-speakers appeared to be mindless emotionalism.

Mainstream leaders were especially concerned about the physical aspects of the new activity. A report on one early gathering said that people danced in the aisles, writhed on the floor, and howled like wild animals. An observer at another gathering said that the activity reminded him of the behavior of voodoo priests, who also speak in tongues and often go into a frenzy while

doing so. Such reports raised considerable alarm among church leaders. Several of them even warned that tongue-speaking was the work of the Devil, who had sent out demons to lead people astray by giving them false emotions.

But despite these warnings, the movement continued to grow, and the practice has slowly gained acceptance, or at least toleration, in most Protestant denominations. In recent decades it has also spread to some Catholic and Anglican congregations. Churches in which glossolalia is prevalent are sometimes called Pentecostal or Charismatic churches.

Some members of these churches speak in a calm rhythmic patter that has been described as pleasant to the ear, or even beautiful. Others show more visible emotion, and sometimes accentuate their speaking with clapping, shaking, shouting, and dancing. In one unusual form called "holy laughter", people begin laughing uncontrollably, often falling out of their chairs and rolling around on the floor. When these people are later asked about their behavior, they say that they had no control over what they did, but were driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. Some of them have described themselves as "drunk with the Holy Spirit."

Some Christians believe that the modern resurgence in tongue speaking is a sign that the End Times are near, and that Jesus will return very soon.

Outside observers have offered several explanations for why people talk in tongues. One common explanation is that many people only pretend to do it and have to fake their performances. Another possibility is that people enter a hypnotic or trance-like state. And observers of some groups have even described what they saw as mass hysteria.

But most tongue-speakers don't care what outsiders think. They believe that they have been baptized with the Holy Spirit in the same way as the earliest followers of Jesus were. Some of them also believe that they are the only true Christians, and the only people who will be saved.

Note: This article was originally published on the Gospel Mysteries website. To read more articles from this site, go to

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